

In Dark Places | A NBC Hannibal Vampire AU

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In Dark Places | A NBC Hannibal Vampire AU

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Summary

"But you've been bitten before."

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"You're thinking of werewolves. Takes more than a bite to turn someone into a vampire. It's a communal experience." A hint of mocking curls his tongue around the phrase, words borrowed from the very creature who had done the biting. "Do they have you chasing monsters now, Jack? One would think they'd have the sense to open a new department by now. The sheer volume of cases alone."

"Bureaucracy moves slowly. That's why I need help. Eight girls, eight months, eight different Minnesota campuses. What do you say, want to take that overactive imagination out in the field?"

Chapter 1

There's blood in his hair, on his hands, coating the back of his tongue, dripping down the slight curve of his teeth. It smells bitter and tastes worse, and yet, it's blood summoned only from his memory. The students occupying the rows before him still regard him with the same tired half-interest that they always do, unconcerned with whatever fantasies spin in the mind of their instructor. All they care about is the clock on the wall, or the scratch of their neighbor's pencil against the paper, or the bloody tableau projected onto the wall behind him. Will Graham prefers them that way. He doesn't appreciate eye contact. Every so often he is unlucky enough to get a student that's *too* interested in him, as handsome instructors often do, but he had escaped that particular fate with this batch.

A hand reaches towards his face, pushing his glasses further up the bridge of his nose, coming away coated in the same phantom blood that speckles his face. "Every killer acts according to their own design. Human or otherwise. They *paint* ." He does not think of the implications of using such a metaphor, while forcing his students to stomach a veritable Pollock-ing of blood in the photo behind him. He can focus only on how immediate his concept of the killer is, how easily he slipped back into his skin, how unnaturally his mind shifts modes and how natural the stickiness of the blood feels between his fingers as he rubs the pads of his fingers against his thumb. "In order to get into the mind of a murderer, you have to understand their grand design. What kind of man would do this? What kind of *creature* would do this?"

A ripple of movement moves through the hall as a hundred students turn towards the door. An imposing figure stands in the doorway, arms crossed, face set in an expression that almost manages to pass for genuine interest in lieu of impatience.

It takes Will a moment to register the change. It is only when his questions pass unacknowledged that he shakes himself free of his own thoughts, blood falling away forgotten as he passes back into the present. It takes a moment for his eyes to focus on the man who had entered the room. A sigh lifts his shoulders and falls past his lips as he lifts a hand to the back of his head, further ruffling his unkempt hair. He addresses the class without raising his eyes to them. "You can go. Be prepared to pick up where we left off."

He turns his back to the pleased shuffle of students gathering up papers, throwing things into bags, and hustling out of the room, as if pretending that this man had not invaded his lecture hall might twist that reality into being.

It does not.

The man approaches anyway -- footsteps quiet on the carpeted stairs -- a sound that did not reflect the overwhelming weight of his presence. Jack Crawford, Agent-in-Charge of the Behavior Analysis Unit, is a man who takes up space, both in sheer physicality and in the commanding air of his bearing. Laugh lines at the creases of his eyes and the corner of his mouth belie his nature as a friend, not an enemy, but Will still finds himself leaning away, pressing himself into the desk as though he might be able to become one with the furniture. Authority figures make him uncomfortable. They always have. They carry expectations and administer countless tests, and Will has a tendency to fail both. He had not even bothered to sit the psychological evaluation when he had first applied to the job at the FBI, a decision that automatically resigned him to the classroom and not the field, despite his extensive experience in policing.

"What do you want, Jack?" Will asks, shifting his weight from foot to foot as he finally turns to face the man, keeping his eyes on the shined leather of his shoes rather than his face.

Jack does not immediately answer. Instead, his eyes float upwards, focusing on the crime scene photo still splashed across the drywall, jaw working against the inside of his cheek as he considers it. "Interesting choice for a profiling class, Mr. Graham," he says eventually, picking his way carefully around the words, shoving his pockets and rocking back on his heels as if that might offer the conversation some semblance of casual small talk. It doesn't.

"Yes, well, no point in profiling a killer we caught, is there?" Will says. His words are both slightly too quick and slightly too sharp. More accusation than comment.

"I suppose not," Jack says, crossing his arms over his chest and finally focusing his gaze on Will. "Though it does make it harder to know whether or not they're right." The end of the phrase lifts like the start of a joke. Will doesn't find it particularly funny.

"Are you here to criticize my teaching methods or did you want something?" Eyes lift halfway up, settling on a set of brown fingers as they tap against the inside of the opposite elbow. That impatience certainly makes it seem like Jack is here on a mission, and it would be easier on both of them if he got to the point sooner rather than later. No point pretending that they're friends when they're hardly even colleagues. The nearest things they have in common that the government signs both their checks.

A sigh settles on Jack's lips and whispers through his shoulders. "Word in the halls says that you're an expert on getting into the minds of everything from sociopaths to the undead. I had

one of my men audit your class. He said that you broke further into the case *from inside this room* than any of my field agents managed. I could use a bit of that kind of thinking.” A pause, lips curling up into a smile as he issues a half-formed joke. “Provided you’re not actually one of them, of course.”

Beneath the many layers of flannel and tweed that weight down his shoulders, Will bristles. “I don’t think like a killer, Jack. I just know how they think. I know how *everyone* thinks. I have an active imagination.” The claim is at once both absolute truth and a lie of omission. He does have quite the imagination, but there’s a cocktail of disorders that helps it dig into niches that most people might otherwise overlook. He’s more empath than sociopath, or, at least, he prefers to think of himself that way. The jury’s still out on what the tests would show, since he has refused all of them. Dodged mandated therapy, too.

“But you’ve been bitten.”

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“You’re thinking of werewolves. Takes more than a bite to turn someone into a vampire. It’s a *communal experience*.” A hint of mocking curls his tongue around the phrase, words borrowed from the very creature who had done the biting. “Do they have you chasing monsters now, Jack? One would think they’d have the sense to open a new department by now. The sheer *volume* of cases alone.”

“Bureaucracy moves slowly. That’s why I need help. Eight girls, eight months, eight different Minnesota campuses. What do you say, want to take that overactive imagination out in the field?”

A map spans the majority of the office’s bulletin board, pins and yarn linking victim names with the locations in which they were reported missing. Each victim has a number, a name, an address, a photo. The numbers are bigger than anything else. Figures. Once a body count mounts to serial figures, people focus less on the victims than on the killer. That kind of erasure has never sat right with Will, both from an ethical standpoint and a practical one. Victimology is often a first step in linking crimes to their perpetrator. Understand the victim - where they live, what they eat, where they jog, what kind of pets they have, whether or not they’ve bothered to fix the broken lock on their Toyota Camry -- and you can find the moment of opportunity. Once you have that, it’s much, much easier to figure out what kind of person might have seized upon it.

It takes a long moment before he notices that there's no recoveries marked on the board. Eight women vanished and not a single crime scene photo. No bloodied and mangled corpses in varying stages of decomposition. No whispers of violence. "How do you know if it's a vampire if you haven't found any bodies?"

"Process of elimination," Jack says, leaning back against his desk and crossing his arms over his chest. "None of the victims returned home, none of the attacks took place during the full moon. Pretty easy to vanish a victim if you turn them into something else."

Will shakes his head as he pulls one of the photos out from beneath a thumbtack, replacing the pin in the wall as he circles back towards Jack. "No vampire turns that many victims so close together. Most vampires only feed once a month, and siring tends to be less of a last minute decision and more of a courtship. Think of it like how a guy will sometimes sit down for a several course meal in the city, cause he's impressing a girl he likes on Valentine's Day, but most of the time, he's going to swing by the Taco Bell drive-thru." Neither scenario is formed from personal experience. Will abhors both Taco Bell and the societal expectations that come alongside romance.

He focuses on the photo in his hand -- taking in pale features, dark hair, a smile that wished for immortality -- before allowing his eyes to drift back to the rest of the board. All eight of the girls have the same look to them. Same coloring, same youth, same wind-chafed skin. Whoever's snatching them -- be it vampire or otherwise -- clearly hasn't found what he's looking for yet. "Your anonymous predator is picking up proxies. Stand-ins. Playing out some kind of fantasy. Find a girl that looks like these ones, and she's probably in his life somewhere. She's the ultimate goal, everyone else is just ..." His voice trails off as he searches for a word that doesn't sound quite as callous as the thought feels. "... *Practice* . There's a pile of bodies somewhere; you just haven't found them yet."

Across the room, Jack's brow knits with concern. "Some human killers relive their ideal victim. If that's the case, any one of these girls could be the intended target. He'd bury her in the list, make it harder to track him down."

A sound caught somewhere between a huff and a laugh heaves forth from Will's lungs as he runs his fingers across his stubbled chin. He shouldn't be amused by this. It's inappropriate, given the gravity of eight girls robbed of life and ripped apart from their families, but it's odd to see a man like Jack Crawford taken so far out of his depth. He assumes the man must be good at traditional cases, given how smoothly he had risen to his position and how widely liked he seems to be within the professional community, but nothing about the current climate is *traditional* . Sure, some monsters hide behind human-esque facades for sheer enjoyment of the hunt, but such things are the exception rather than the rule.

"You're still thinking like a human. Vampire minds play by different rules. You don't need me to chase down *human* killers for you. You've been doing that for years. If based on the evidence, we decide that it's not a vampire, then we'll start to talk *reliving* . Reliving is for killers who don't exchange blood with their victims and promise them eternal afterlife."

A thoughtful pause settles upon Jack as he regards Will, thinks upon the implications of the statement, the sheer simplicity of a principal that has somehow escaped his best people yet

come so quickly to a man who has resigned himself to little more than a glorified lecturer. He needs Will. He needs his insight. "Pack a bag. I want you to get closer to this case."

"No." The word stands firm, even while Will busies himself with replacing the photo and picking up the jacket that he had abandoned beside the door, fully intent on leaving Crawford behind. Traipsing through the thoughts of killers from the safety of an office is one thing, but he can't go into the field. He can't stare at the families of victims and feel every minutia of their pain. When he was a cop, he had allowed himself to become so overwhelmed by his surroundings that he had put both himself and his fellow officers at risk. He can't do that again. Even when he had properly applied for the FBI, he had fully intended to sit behind a desk and analyze files, not socialize with the already *damned* .

"There are plenty of people who do what I do," he insists, ignoring the fact that Jack has already moved to block the door. "Alana Bloom at Georgetown is just as good as I am, if not better."

"That's not exactly true, is it?" Jack says calmly, placing one hand over the door knob even as Will attempts to slide by him. "You have a very specific way of thinking about these things. Bloom theorizes, you *become* . It's how you make jumps that other people can't explain."

"I have the same evidence everyone else does. It's not my fault that other people don't look hard enough." Failing to reach the door, he takes a step backward and makes a half-turn, avoiding Jack's eyes every moment of the way. He doesn't like being put in a position where he feels like he has to defend himself, like he's a monster on a leash being dragged out to bait his friends. He's a man, same as everyone else in this building.

"Help me find more evidence then," Jack requests, still calm, but stubbornly *unrelenting* .

Will's arm reaches up to his neck, palm rubbing against the knotted scars that sit just beneath his unruly curls. Talking is exhausting in the best of circumstances, but arguing? Arguing is so much worse. It's easier to just give in. Surely this will all be over soon. One trip, one victim, one case. That's all they need, right? He's not even signing up to be present when they catch the killer.

"Fine. You win. Let's go *find more evidence*."

Chapter 2

Victim Eight's home is almost cloying in its normalcy. Inherited china sits on shelves, covered in a thin sheet of dust that suggests that it only sees use on holidays. The furniture is charmingly slapdash -- coherent in color but not in style -- the result of a slow evolution as pieces are found, donated, and replaced to keep up with the current decade, if not the current trends. The lights are cozy and yellow, and the thermostat is kept slightly warmer than Will keeps his own. It seems a friendly enough place to grow up. Shame it had to end the way that it did.

He stands slightly apart from Jack, focused on the spread of family photos that sits upon an antique buffet. Days at the beach, nights in the mountains, and high school graduation photos freeze the missing girl in moments of innocence and bliss. These photos don't speak to the sort of girl who would run away, but they already knew that. Anyone still claiming otherwise is deluding themselves, including the girls' parents.

A voice floats over his shoulder as her dad desperately clings to that sad little hope of an ice floe as it creeps towards more southern seas, "She was supposed to come home for the weekend, but she could have gone off by herself. I can see how the pressure of school might've gotten to her. Maybe she just got on a train and thought she'd go somewhere else for a while." It's obvious that he's turned over that possibility hundreds of times in the ensuing days, convincing himself that it could be true. For him, it has to be. Accepting the alternative would be devastating. No one wants to lose the people they love, and parents never want to see their children die first. It's not the natural order of things.

Will's eyes drift to another photo. Friends at a birthday party, sitting cross-legged around the very rug that he had stepped around in the parlor. A cat, surly and gray, sits in the girl's lap. Unlikely that she would bring it to college with her. Most dorms don't allow pets of the non-emotional support variety.

"I'm sorry to say," Jack says, pausing as he looks towards Will's back, wishing for a moment, that the man was capable of both having empathy and displaying it, "That she fits the victim profile. It is unlikely that she left on her own." He hasn't breached the possibility of vampires with them.

He takes a step back, leaning around a corner to take a look at the kitchen floor. Two cat bowls sit on the floor, one half-full with food, the other with water. Seems unlikely that they would've left that out for so long, if the cat was no longer a resident of the home.

"How's the cat?" he asks, turning his attention to the parents for the first time, interrupting the inevitable question about whether or not their daughter might still be alive.

The mother stumbles over her tongue for a second, before finally managing a confused, "What?"

"How's your cat?" He reiterated, trying to emulate Jack's manner to the best of his ability, but still landing closer to aloof professor than smooth and competent professor. "You were gone

for the weekend, so you must have expected Elise to feed it when she got home. Was it weird? Did it seem hungry? If she didn't make it home, it wouldn't have eaten all weekend."

Confused blinking and shaking heads tell Will all he needs to know. Dread sets into the pit of his stomach, and he finds himself staring intently at the ground, begging for the hardwood to be so kind as to swallow him up before he has to watch the parents' face the reality of their daughter's disappearance.

She hadn't gone missing from school. She had got on the train. She had fed the cat, and she had vanished from home. The predator had been in these very rooms, and if it was a vampire, it had likely been invited in.

Understanding dawns across Jack's face as he steps away and pulls out his mobile phone, quick-dialing dispatch and requesting a forensics team and a photographer, momentarily ignoring the confused protestations of the parents. The Nichols' House is officially a crime scene, and the profile of the killer has already shifted. Everything that had been presumed true by the thumbtacks and string on the map in Crawford's office has been twisted. The girls might not be going missing at their colleges. They're vanishing from their homes.

"Can I see your daughter's bedroom?" Will asks, ignoring the worry and confusion creased across the couple's faces. He's not here for emotional support. He has a puzzle to solve.

"The police were up there this morning," the dad replies. His eyes are wide, and Will can already sense him backpedalling even further into his denial, building up new theories, convincing himself that he hadn't failed in making this house safe.

A sigh traces his lips, speaking of the weight of explanations that are better left unspoken. "I need to see it."

It takes a moment of Jack's help to dig out a pair of sterile gloves and convince the family to help. Eventually, the father volunteers to lead, while Jack and the mother remain behind.

Gloved fingers twist around each other as Will turns the corners of the hallway.. He doesn't like being left alone with people, especially under the current circumstances, and he's thankful that the man is too distracted to attempt to hold conversation. He's not a deft hand with emotions, especially heavy ones.

It turned out that he had not needed a guide. The very cat who had proved the key to proving that Elise had disappeared from her home is pawing at the bottom of the door, as if it might be able to force its way through. That is concerning. Will is almost as good at reading animals as he is at reading people, and though he prides himself on being a dog person, the cat is practically telegraphing its desperation.

His heart breaks before both halves sink into the growing pit of fear in his stomach.

The father side-steps the cat, reaching for the door before Will stops him. "I'll get that. Don't touch anything." His eyes settle once again on the pet between their feet, which has now turned hopeful eyes towards them, sensing that its wish to enter the room will soon be fulfilled. "You might want to hold the cat," he adds, waiting a beat to turn the knob.

The faint scent of death greets them through the open door, dim as the light seeping through the curtains from the street outside. Fear hardens into first despair and then action as Will's eyes alight upon a prone figure in the bed. Elise. Dead. Gone. Officially the eight victim.

Will practically shoves the father out of the room, hoping to delay the inevitable realization. It's too late. Horror slips into the man's eyes as he stares into the darkness, allowing the cat to slip from his arms.

"I need you to leave," Will insists. "The room needs to be clean. No one can touch her. I'm sorry." It's scant comfort, but the closest that they can get to saving this girl is to find her killer and prevent them from killing anyone else, and contaminated evidence will make that almost impossible. "Please." It is an almost desperate plea, and finally, painfully, he succeeds in shepherding them both out of the room to begin the agonizing wait for the rest of the team.

It is not long before Jack escorts Will back to the bedroom. "I want you to do what you do when you examine a crime scene with your classes. I'll give you as long as you need. Talk to me when you're ready, and I'll let the others know when they can come in." The words are as calm and gentle as they always are -- treading lightly -- but Will is very, very aware that he has not been given a choice in this. No one asked him if he was prepared to stand alone in this room with the body of a dead girl, trying to reach into the mind of the killer who had returned her.

The door clicks shut as Jack departs, and Will takes a moment to circle the room, drawing back the curtain to stare down at the flashing emergency lights, and a family who has been cruelly robbed of all hope for a happy ending. No doubt the killer had stood in that very street earlier that day, cargo in hand, ready to scale the tree and replace his quarry. Momentary disgust tugs at the corner of Will's mouth. Even though crossing into the murderer's mind is the last thing that he wants to do, he's already caught himself doing it. He can't keep the darkness at bay for long.

In the blue and red wash of emergency lights, he sinks down to the floor beneath the window, staring at the bed and the corpse within it, allowing his mind to fill in the gaps and step backwards --

He stands over a living, breathing girl, held prisoner within her own dreams, blissfully unaware of his presence here. He can sense her pulse on his skin, practically taste her scent as it wafts through the air between them. He had been invited inside before today. A deliveryman, maybe. Or a neighbor. Or a repair guy. There's a long moment of consideration before the deadly strike, staring at the arteries and veins that tighten in her neck as she breathes, tracing angles, considering how best to minimize the mess. Mess would mean being caught. Mess would link him to this crime and the handful of others he's devoured since he had first been turned. He must act quickly and with care.

There's a growl before teeth sink into soft, unmarked flesh, a moment of terror as she stirs with a scream, appealing to an empty house where no one but him can hear her --

A voice shakes him from his reconstruction. It's energetic. Boisterous. Female. "You're Will Graham."

"You're not supposed to be here." His mind feels somewhat detached from his body, and it takes him a moment to settle back into using his own voice. The bitter thought of blood still clings to the back of his throat -- cloying, vile.

The invader ignores him, soldiering on with whatever thought she had barged in here with and quickly moving onto the next one with near-manic enthusiasm, "You set the standards for time of death in a werewolf attack. I found antler velvet in the wounds on her chest. Not the neck though. Straight fangs." There's a slight breath as she notes his confusion, finally realizing that he is barely keeping pace with her. "You don't seem like you've done this before."

Nerves shake his tongue as he says, "I'm a special investigator."

Surprise lifts her eyebrows. "So you're not an F.B.I. agent?" She had assumed, based on her familiarity with his written work, that he had been in the field at some point. Presumptuous on her part, apparently. She doesn't bother to apologize for it. Better to think quickly and confidently and screw up every once in a while than to get caught in a web of inaction.

"No, I uh -- refused to sit the screening tests." he stumbles over the words, overwhelmed by both the force of her presence, his own distaste for conversation, and the suddenness of finding himself back in his own body.

"You unstable?" There she is, jumping to conclusions again. It makes her a good investigator, if a questionable scientist. She picks up evidence and turns it into conclusions.

Will doesn't have a chance to answer before three more bodies invade the room, sending his anxiously beating heart up into the back of his throat.

"I found antler velvet in the chest wounds." The woman announces again, clearly pleased to have found an audience that might listen to her, turning a blind eye to Will as he takes a nervous step backwards.

The two men that he doesn't recognize, the not-Jack men, contribute immediately to the conversation, matching the woman's energy level. "She was murdered, Bev, not gored by an elk. Elk don't gore, and they definitely don't put their victims in second floor bedrooms."

"Maybe wendigos do. Are wendigos antlered? They're antlered in folk art. Have we done a wendigo before?"

"Wendigos feed on flesh, right? Are there missing organs?"

It takes a moment for Will to gather both his thoughts and his will to speak. Though he doesn't care much for talking to strangers, he abides a misunderstanding even less, especially when misunderstandings would delay his timely exit from this case. He has great interest in being out of here as quickly as possible.

“There’s a vampire bite on her neck, though she’s not fully exsanguinated.” He can feel eight eyes turn to him, though he keeps his gaze on the window and the officers milling outside.

“Antler velvet is rich in nutrients and promotes healing. Our killer may have done this on purpose, if not as a practical gesture, as a symbolic one. It’s -- um -- it’s why he returned her to her bed. He turned the clock back as far as he could, to the moment when he killed her, or at least, the moment when he drained her into unconsciousness. Still not sure why he would’ve taken her, in either state.”

“Could she be the intended victim, the one he was preparing for?” Jack asks, mind racing through the implications. “Did she die before they could complete the process?”

“No. This is ...” Will’s voice trails off, eyes turning towards the dead girl and the dried blood that marks the spots of her trauma. “Something else went wrong. It’s an apology.”

The tension in the silent room is tangible, and it creeps into Will’s already throbbing skull.

“Does anyone have an aspirin?”

Chapter 3

The flight back to Virginia should have been easy. Will may have been relegated to sitting coach, as most people flying on taxpayer dollars are, but he's not particularly tall and given the overwhelming state of his exhaustion, it should have been easy enough to drift into a painless and dreamless sleep. However, he only manages to sleep fitfully and in short bursts, and nightmarish imagery summoned from the case plays out behind his eyes. It morphs and changes, at once foreign, and at once terribly, horribly familiar.

Blood spouting from a nicked artery, drenching his clothes and the entire room. The girl's body turning limp in his arms, succumbing to the loss. An off-taste sinking into his tongue, spreading like poison, turning it numb. Antlers rising from the floor -- mounting, impaling, desecrating as they pierce through cold, dead flesh.

He is relieved when a flight attendant finally taps his shoulder and he is swept away in the tide of disembarking passengers. Surely he will feel better in his own home, where he might be able to put all of this behind him. He had, after all, done what he was asked to do. He had gone to Minnesota, dug up new evidence and put the pieces together. Plus, Jack Crawford and his team had a body now. They won't need him, he resolves. Though perhaps in believing in something so tenuous, he is clinging to the same perilous, deluded hope that had so devoured Mr. Nichols.

The drive from the airport to his home is a lengthy one, made mostly on two-lane highways and dark backroads. It's the sort of route people have taken to avoiding once night falls -- especially now that death by preternatural means has become more prominent -- but Will feels relatively safe. He carries a gun with silver bullets, as well an emergency kit of other specialized weapons. He'll be fine.

The warm pool of his headlights washes over an animal and his head whips sideways so fiercely that it tugs at the scar tissue on his neck, reawakening old wounds. Uncertainty tightens his fingers around the wheel as he wonders if he's being drawn into a trap by some unknown creature. It's too early in the month for werewolves, but other things have been known to shift from skin to skin and prey on unwitting travelers.

A golden retriever -- leash trailing behind him -- becomes visible in the rearview mirror, and Will lets out a sigh of relief. He throws the car into park and teaches into the back seat, pulling out a bag of treats. More and more dogs have turned up ownerless lately, presumably because the owners keep getting picked off. Will saves as many as he can. It is the least he can do in a world that grows ever darker. He keeps the dogs safe and they keep him sane.

It takes about fifteen minutes to bribe the dog into his car, and Will chooses to leave the bloody leash behind. Better to not carry that kind of thing into his home. Who knows what might be tracking it.

Half an hour later, he ignores the chill and gives the dog a bath and crates him, introducing him to the rest of the pack with both the barrier and supervision for protection. "This is

Winston. Winston, this is everybody. Welcome home." It is not the name that had been engraved on the collar, but dogs are smart, and it's better to relegate the memories of whatever the dog had lost and undergone to another life entirely.

Will sometimes wishes that he could disappear as easily as they can. He could do with a bit of saving.

Tiredness haunts him at work. It pulls him away from his thoughts as he talks at his students and pins him down with a vague sense of discomfort that he can't quite seem to shake. If any of his students or colleagues notice, they don't share their concern. He doesn't blame them. After all, he is notorious for his strange behavior.

His phone buzzes almost constantly in his pocket throughout the course of the morning. Each of the messages is from Jack Crawford, demanding answers that he doesn't have, desperately attempting to dig deeper into whatever scant insight Will had gained in that bedroom. Will ignores every single one. He has another job to do. He's not in Minnesota anymore. They're back in normal territory, and he's no longer beholden to Jack Crawford's demands.

At lunch, he hides in the stark white and red of the men's bathroom, splashing water on his face. It doesn't rinse away the dark circles under his eyes, but it frees his lids of some of the heaviness that has so plagued them, and brightens his mind enough that he feels as though he might be able to think again. However, after he pats his face dry, he catches sight of Jack's all-too-familiar face in the mirror, full to the brim with a degree of rage and frustration that Will hadn't glimpsed yesterday. Perhaps he should have responded to those emails, Will thinks, as with great resignation, he turns to face his doom.

Jack's jaw works at his words for a moment, and another person dares to enter the bathroom, whistling quietly, ignorant to the heat of Jack's wrath. For a moment, Will thinks that he's been saved by that whistling presence, but Jack snaps. A shout of "Use the ladies' room!" echoes across tiled floors and nips at the poor man's heels as he flees. Will wishes that he could follow, but he leans against the sink, bracing himself for whatever might be forthcoming.

"Do you trust me, Will?" An aggressive query, laced with insecurity and a desperate need to resolve this case at whatever cost it demands, no matter how steep the rates.

Will is not free to answer honestly. Jack may not be his direct superior, but he is powerful enough to get him fired, and he would like to hold onto his job as long as he can. Not many people in this area are willing to hire eye-contact shy ex-cops who were bitten by vampires. There's a slight, uncertain pause, before he delivers a quiet "Yes," in the vague direction of the floor.

"Then tell me what the killer was thinking. Tell me who he is. Help me understand him. You know how to be a psychopath and a vampire and God knows what else, so tell me what he is."

"I only know what I told you."

"You knew enough to know that it was an apology. What was he apologizing for?" Jack's voice creeps up in force and volume with every syllable.

"I. Don't. Know."

"Figure it out. *What was he apologizing for?*"

Will's mind and heart race in tandem, shifting through possibilities, fighting through the haze of horror to remember something, anything, that he might have synthesized yesterday. There had been so much to take in, too much to take in, and he had lost it.

He paces the floor, hands running through his hair with frantic, frustrated energy until he settles upon a single thought. "He couldn't honor her. He loves her, or the idea of her, but he couldn't act on it, so he let her go."

"Vampires can't love." Jack resolves, standing firm, still pushing Will ever closer to the brink with the sheer force of his words.

"Love, obsession, I don't care what you call it. Devouring is intimate, siring is a form of courtship, it's - it's a promise made and a promise kept."

"So was this the one girl he's fixated on? The fantasy?"

"No."

"What do you mean no? You said he loved her."

"The idea of her. He loves whichever girl is the end goal. He just couldn't drink this one." A thought coats the back of his mind the way a poison had sunk into his tongue in his dreams. "Did Elise Nichols have cancer?"

A sudden calm sinks into Jack's face, shifting it back into the familiarity that had stalked it the day before. He had been pushing for answers, had been angry at the lack of them, and here, finally, is something that he can latch onto. "If she was sick, she would've been unpalatable. It's a thought. The autopsy hasn't been returned yet, I can have them check."

Will nods, tense muscles shaking from the intensity with which Jack's anger had struck him. "He hasn't eaten. He'll need to strike again soon."

Dread sinks into both men's skin with equal veracity, raising goosebumps and setting in a sudden chill. The realization means that they are now working on a deadline, and it is mercilessly short.

Chapter 4

Alana Bloom is no stranger to urgent calls. She has always been the friend that people call when their car breaks down or they need someone to bail them out of jail. They may have to face down a lecture about preparing for emergencies and acting in their best self-interest, but she always drops everything to be of service to those whom she cares about, which is *almost* everyone that she knows. Though she is primarily known for the breadth of her mind, she possesses an even bigger heart. She loves deeply and fiercely. Always has. Thus, when Jack Crawford calls her to express concern about Will Graham and eight murdered girls, she cancels her classes for the day, grabs her jacket and her briefcase, and drives straight to Quantico.

Alana is not a regular in this building by any stretch of the imagination, but she has been called in as a consultant before. She's become something of a specialist on emotionally driven psychotic breaks, the sorts of crimes that lead to overkill and loud declarations of justice. This case doesn't quite fall into that realm, but if Will Graham is right, the apology suggests that the crime could be tied to strong emotions -- love, lust, protectiveness, the things she knows well. Besides, as a friend of Will, she'll do anything to shield him from this kind of work. He's fragile; there's no way that he can handle that kind of pressure. It would break him.

Jack meets her at her car, and she greets him with a warm, toothy grin. "Long time no see, Jack."

"I wish it could be under better circumstances," he replies, sticking his hands in his pockets and tilting his head in the intended direction, inviting her to follow. She does.

It takes two of her steps to match his. Between the high difference and the discomfort of her heels, she's not built for those long, physical strides. "The poor circumstances aren't your fault. Most people would say that it comes with your line of work."

"Still, some days are better than others. At least Will has helped us make progress. Without him, I don't know where we'd be."

"About that --" she begins, warmth finally fading, grin giving way to firm resolve, "You can't keep bringing Will into the field. He's teetering on the edge of a cliff as it is."

"Do you have a professional interest in Will Graham?"

"I have a personal interest in Will Graham." There's a pause as Jack eyes her, eyebrow raised. "Not like that. We're friends. It would be unethical for me to study him, and besides, any scholarly work about Will would have to be published posthumously." She had once considered squirreling away her observations in a discreet folder on her laptop, holding out for a day when she might someday be able to publish them without fracturing his trust, but the very idea had filled her with so much guilt that she had failed to follow through. Her theories are hers and hers alone.

"Do you think he's stable?"

She comes to a stop in the middle of the sidewalk, staring down Jack Crawford with a glare that could melt flesh. "Not if you keep ignoring my counsel. Keep Will away from your cases."

"I can't do that. There are lives at stake."

"*His* life is at stake." A sigh eases from her lungs. "Do you know what Will's primary drive is?"

"His imagination."

"That's what's directly useful to *you* , Jack. What do you think actually drives *him* ?"

There's a pause. Jack's hands finally leave his pocket, palms facing upward as if they're carrying the weight of his thoughts.

"Fear. Fear comes alongside imagination."

"Fear is the price for imagination. How terrified would you be if you took a step sideways and found yourself thinking differently and feeling urges that aren't your own?"

Jack's eyes turn briefly skyward before they float back down to Alana's vengeful blues. "One case. I need him for one case. After that, I'll leave him alone. I promise."

Will stands slightly apart from the forensics team as they busy themselves with the corpse of Elise Nichols, desperately searching for answers that the body is unwilling to produce. It's the same team that has interrupted him at the crime scene, and though he still finds himself overwhelmed by their energy, he has bothered to learn their names: Beverly Katz, Jimmy Price, and Brian Zeller. They're an odd crew, not the sort of people he would expect to find in a department this prestigious and competitive. He expected more dour frowns and furrowed brows, not bandied jokes and laugh lines.

"I found a metal shaving caught in her clothes," Katz says, leaning forward as she indicates the exact place in which she had located it. "Less than 8mm in diameter. It'd be easy for a killer to miss it when he's cleaning up after himself."

"Are we sure it came from the killer? Antlers and metal filings aren't exactly a normal combo." Zeller's doubt is evident in the slight frown that marks his face.

"You ever met a hunter? They're very industrious. Real do-it-yourself-ers," Price adds, leaning back against a nearby table and crossing his arms over his chest. "Maybe he's ready to host his own HGTV show: Vampire Hunter House Hunters."

Katz shakes her head. "It didn't match anything in the home, and the metal is a pretty specific alloy. Used in industrial work, mostly. I wouldn't be surprised if our guy is a plumber or a construction worker. Maybe a factory worker, if we found the right factory."

"If he's a plumber, that explains how he got an invitation into the home." Excitement creeps into Zeller's voice as he adds, "Demon plumbers, imagine that."

Will Graham shakes his head, speaking up for the first time, "Did you find anything in the bloodwork?"

Katz picks up the file beside the body, leafing through it until she finds the appropriate chart. "Her T-Cell count is way lower than it should be. Lymphoma, I'd guess, or AIDS. They didn't test for either."

"Doesn't matter." Will stares intensely at the body, so intensely in fact, that it almost seems to move, lifting from the table, hanging in midair, held aloft by the antlers piercing through her skin. "He mounted her. It's a ceremony almost, securing the sanctity of the meal. He wanted to bleed her, but he couldn't, she, I'm, she tasted too wrong. He's not just hunting for himself, he's hunting for others."

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